

New research shows exercise may help pregnant women quit smoking

December 16 2013, by Jeff Renaud

New research from Western University shows that pregnant women wishing to quit smoking should exercise and just 15 to 20 minutes of walking is enough to stave off most tobacco cravings.

According to recent statistics, 19 per cent of Canadian women between 20 to 24 years reported smoking during their most recent pregnancy. There is well-documented scientific evidence that smoking during pregnancy results in lower birth weight, prenatal death, and behavioural problems among offspring.

"Based on what we know about smoking and pregnancy these numbers are too high," says Harry Prapavessis, Director of the Exercise and Health Psychology Laboratory at Western's Faculty of Health Sciences. "Consistent with previous research, our study reveals that low-to-moderate intensity exercise is associated with a reduction in cravings and even tobacco withdrawal symptoms amongst pregnant smokers. We believe exercise holds great potential to help women quit smoking during pregnancy."

Research has shown that exercise minimizes cravings and tobacco withdrawal symptoms after temporary abstinence in smokers, but this study is the first time the scenario has been replicated in pregnant smokers. The findings of the study from Western's Exercise and Health Psychology Laboratory were published in the journal *Addictive Behaviors*.

For the study, Prapavessis and his team examined the effects of 20 minutes of exercise on tobacco cravings and withdrawal symptoms among temporarily abstinent and inactive [pregnant smokers](#). The researchers recruited 30 [pregnant women](#) in their second trimester in Canada and England to participate in the study. All participants smoked approximately 10 cigarettes per day.

On average, the participants reported 30 percent reduction in tobacco cravings though the cravings did return in some cases 30 minutes after exercise. Participants also reported less restlessness, irritability, tension and depression during the study.

"Smoking during pregnancy is common, and quitting at any point during [pregnancy](#) can yield benefits to both the fetus and the mother," says Prapavessis. "Once you quit [smoking](#), [withdrawal symptoms](#) typically follow and a strong desire to smoke returns. These factors both contribute to a high number of relapses. We believe [regular exercise](#) can help reduce the number of relapses."

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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